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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION POLITICIAN RELEASED UNCONDITIONALLY

REFTEL: Banjul 79

SUMMARY

1. On March 19, 2009, prominent Gambian opposition leader and former presidential candidate Halifa Sallah was released unconditionally after 11 days of detention for reporting on and protesting an ongoing campaign apparently supported by the government to rid the country of "witches" (reftel). The biggest surprise was the explicit confirmation in an official court document that the "witch hunt" which has been going on for two months, was sanctioned by President Jammeh.

NEW CHARGES

2. On March 19, Sallah was taken from Mile 2 Central Prison, where he had been held after failing to meet his stringent bail conditions (reftel), to Police Headquarters in Banjul where he was informed that the state was replacing his charge sheet, which included accusations of "spying" and "acting with seditious intent", with five new charges. These were namely; "conduct conducive to the breach of peace", "seditious Act", "unlawful Assembly", "inciting disobedience of lawful orders" and "obtaining information which may be useful to an enemy".

3. The particulars in four of the charges refer to Mr. Sallah's meeting with residents of Makumbaya village at which he allegedly tried to incite the people to challenge "the government policy of screening witches" and one count referred to the exercise as "a lawful order of the President". Mr. Sallah was then moved from Police Headquarters to Brikama Magistrate's Court where the Director of Public Prosecution, Mr. Richard N. Chenge, made the surprise announcement that both the old and new charges were being dropped "in the interest of peace and justice."

DENIAL OF ACCESS

4. During most of his time at Mile 2 prison, Sallah was refused visitors. It was not until March 18, the day before he was released, that his wife was finally granted access. Following his release, Mr. Sallah said in an interview with the newspaper he publishes ("Foroyaa") that he would continue to investigate whether the abduction and maltreatment of ordinary people by the witchdoctors is continuing. He would also write to the President and the Attorney General to find out if there is a written government policy regarding witches as stated in his second charge sheet.

OPPOSITION SOLIDARITY

5. Although Sallah has said that his crusade against the witchdoctors is not a partisan affair but rather a matter of social justice, opposition politicians have rallied behind him on this issue, perhaps because they may have finally found an issue with which they can garner public support to attack the Jammeh government. Shortly before his release, five senior politicians representing Sallah's National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD), the United Democratic Party and the National Reconciliation Party met to discuss a common strategy if Sallah continued to be held. One of the politicians told FSN that they had agreed that as a first step, they would issue a joint public condemnation of the trial and the activities of the witchdoctors. He

did not say what they would have done next.

COMMENT

¶16. There have been no reports that the Guinean witchdoctors have continued their exercise since the release of Halifa Sallah. The negative international publicity of both the trial and the so-called witchcraft rituals and the unified stand of the political opposition on this issue may have forced the government to call off the exercise. END COMMENT